

# INTRODUCTION: CURRENT PATTERNS OF LANGUAGE USE, CULTURE AND IDENTITY IN BOTSWANA

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Botswana, with a small population of around 2 million people, is a linguistically and culturally rich country. Most of the sociolinguistic and cultural studies which have investigated the levels and extent of language and cultural shift in Botswana were carried out between 5 and 25 years ago. The scenario has since changed due to numerous factors including rapid urbanization, which favours the widely used languages such as Setswana; the mass media, which disseminate information mainly in Setswana and English; mobility, which has made many communities intermingle; socio-political and economic interactions and the enhanced role of Setswana as both a national and regional language in Southern Africa. The socio-cultural impact of Setswana and, to a lesser extent, English, has therefore been expanded. Setswana has become a primary language, that is, a language that is frequently used in public domains in most Botswana communities. The rapid shift to Setswana is intensely enhanced by its expanded status, increased prestige, extended functions and enhanced positive attitudes. Moreover, earlier studies did not make a holistic investigation of all the aspects of language and cultural endangerment, such as the patterns of language use, the role of attitudes, the intergenerational language and cultural transmission modes, the dramatic cultural changes and the ambivalent forms of identity.

It is against this background that a wide-scale collaborative investigation was conducted by members of the Department of African Languages and Literature at the University of Botswana to determine the levels of language and cultural maintenance and shift affecting the various language groups in Botswana in terms of linguistic and cultural identity. The research covered all the ethnolinguistic groups of Botswana, with the exception of Setswana (national language) and English (official language).

This Special Issue (SI) showcases articles that were developed from some of the findings of this research project. The first two articles present findings on the current sociolinguistic status and role of selected minority languages of Botswana. **Batibo** examines the patterns of ethnic identity loss in one of the few remaining southern Khoesan languages, namely, !Xóð. He identifies the patterns of language use, features of identity and the prevailing language attitudes towards language maintenance and demonstrates that the ethnic identity loss model can be distorted, where there are factors that have an impact on people's lives in terms of fundamental

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human needs. The paper argues that strong external socio-cultural pressure in the form of restrictions and assimilation or deep spiritual involvement may distort both cultural and autonymic identities.

**Mogara, Kari, Kadenge and Molefhi** focus on patterns of language use, transgenerational language transmission, language attitudes and ethno-cultural identity in six communities in north eastern Botswana, namely, Lesoma, Nata, Kachikau, Kazungula, Pandamatenga and Gweta. The paper demonstrates language use preferences and how minority languages are faring in relation to Setswana and English, and in relation to one another. Their main findings confirm previous impressionistic observations that Setswana dominates public, official and social domains while the ethno-linguistic vitality of community languages is very low because they have no official status, have limited intergenerational transmission and remain restricted to private domains like the home and cultural activities.

The last four papers in this SI shift the focus from language issues to cultural practices and spiritual beliefs. **Nhlekisana** succinctly presents an analysis of the sociocultural significance of the puberty rites of !Xóǀ girls of Zutshwa in south western Botswana. She identifies the changes that are taking place in the performance of this rite and accompanying rituals. The importance of documenting the !Xóǀ cultural practices, sensibilities and traditions is underscored in this paper because they are endangered like those of other minority ethnic groups in Botswana.

**Gadilatolwe** and **M'raiji** document the use of taboos as a strategy for socialization, acculturation and communication among members of the Bayei community in North Western Botswana. The paper assesses how the Bayei use taboos as a socialization agent to communicate, to regulate behaviour, to teach and to impart cultural values and sensibilities. One of the main observations of their paper is that the Bayei use taboos for guidance and protection in their daily socioeconomic activities such as fishing, hunting and rites of passage. It is clear from the findings of this study that taboos reflect and provide insights into the Bayei's spirituality and philosophy.

The penultimate contribution of this SI by **Kezilahabi** discusses the concept of God among the San, focusing on the Naro community in the Ghanzi District of Botswana. He juxtaposes the understanding of the concepts of God in the Western world and the concepts of God in Africa, and the problems of interpretation that emerge therefrom. He further examines the San's rock art as the basis of human will propagated by the ideological effect embedded in the eland's spiritual potency. His main argument is that, for the San, the God they believe in is the foundation of all the rituals performed in their society as they dance around the fire which is the light impossible to extinguish. He concludes that, among the San, God is the omnipresence of power that can be experienced through nature and human will.

This SI closes with a discussion by **Itumelang** of the numerous ways through which selected groups of the Khoesan people of Botswana dealt with death and burial in their different societies in the past. She compared the practices of the Shuakhwe, Kachikau and Lesoma, the Danisa of Nata and the Xung of Bere and further assesses how their co-existence with other ethnic groups of Botswana has impacted on the traditional burial procedures of the Khoesan. Her main findings demonstrate that the Shuakhwe have a unique and more elaborate form of burial compared to the other groups that she studied. Healing and cleansing of the bereaved with medicinal herbs and head shaving are reported as rituals that cut across all the Khoesan groups and are even preserved to date.

This SI thus offers an elaborate assessment of the most current sociolinguistic and cultural situation in the country by showing the degree to which the various languages and cultural practices are endangered at their various levels of use. It provides latest data on the rate of loss and the type of measures that could be adopted to arrest the situation so as to safeguard the rich linguistic and cultural heritage of the country, given that Botswana is the home of the majority of Africa's Khoesan languages. The SI should be of interest to scholars and students of sociolinguistics, indigenous knowledge systems, intangible heritage, cultural and myths studies.

We would like to end by expressing our sincere gratitude to the Office of Research and Development, University of Botswana, which generously provided research funds to members of the Department of African Languages and Literature which enabled the collection of data from various parts of Botswana. Such massive amounts of data provided the basis for the articles in this SI. We also would like to thank the respondents in the field who were highly friendly and cooperative in providing the valuable data which has resulted in this publication, as well as the field assistants who acted as interpreters in areas where intermediary languages were needed.

Many thanks are due to the Editorial Board of the *Marang: Journal of Language and Literature* for accepting to dedicate this issue to articles developed from our departmental research project. In particular, we would like to thank Professor Rose Letsholo-Tafila for editorial and content feedback on all the articles contained in this SI. We are grateful to the many colleagues who spared some time from their busy schedules to peer review the articles that are contained in this SI. We hope scholars and students will find the issue inspiring and that it will motivate discussions that will deepen and broaden our understanding of language and cultural vitality in Africa as a whole and Botswana in particular.